

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

Peter Evensen | August 2017

Author

Paul names himself the author at the beginning of the letter:

1 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

Paul also says that he is personally writing this letter in chapter 2:

1 Thessalonians 2:18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.

Recipients and Background

Paul tells us to whom he is writing in v. 1: “To the church of the Thessalonians.” Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and the residence of the Roman proconsul. It was on the road that connected Rome with Byzantium. It was also an important harbor town. It is modern-day Thessaloniki, Greece.

Paul did not visit Thessalonica until his second missionary journey. On his first missionary journey he only went as far west as the mountain regions of Pamphilia and Pisidia.

After the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul wanted to strengthen and encourage the churches he had visited on his first missionary journey (Acts 15:36). Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement over bringing John Mark (who had left them on their first journey), so Paul and Barnabas separated and Paul took Silas (whose Roman name was Silvanus) and went through Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:38-41).

In Derbe and Lystra they came to know Timothy. After having Timothy circumcised, Paul and Silas took Timothy along with them on their travels. They strengthened the churches and delivered the decisions of the Jerusalem council: that the Gentiles are free from observing the ceremonial law (Acts 16:1-5).

They went through Galatia and Phrygia and then to Troas, where Paul received a vision in the night of a man from Macedonia calling them to come. They sailed from Troas to Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia, where they stayed a few days. At Philippi, Paul cast out an evil spirit from a girl. Her owners seized Paul and Silas and had them beaten and thrown into prison. After being released they were asked to leave the city (Acts 16:6-39).

Paul, Silas, and Timothy passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews:

Acts 17:2-9 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the

world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

We see from the above account that the church in Thessalonica was made up of some Jews and “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (Acts 17:4). While there were some Jews in the church, it was mostly Gentiles.

Luke’s account in Acts is only a summary of Paul’s work in Thessalonica. We learn from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that the Philippians sent money to Paul *twice* while he was in Thessalonica:

Philippians 4:16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

This fact, and Paul’s description of his work in Thessalonica (2:1-12) show that Paul had spent some time in Thessalonica.

When the Jews created problems in Thessalonica, the brothers sent Paul, Silas, and Timothy away by night to Berea (Acts 17:10).

When the Jews heard that Paul was preaching in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble in Berea as well. The brothers in Berea sent Paul by sea to Athens, but Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea. Paul then sent word back to Berea for Silas and Timothy to come to him in Athens as soon as they could (Acts 17:13-15).

Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens (this is not mentioned in Acts, but is implied by 1 Thessalonians 3:1). Paul then sent Timothy back to Thessalonica from Athens. It also seems that Paul sent Silas back to Macedonia as well, perhaps to Philippi. Alternatively, Paul might have told Timothy in a letter to go back to Thessalonica before he and Silas came to Paul in Greece.

In any case, Paul then went to Corinth after Athens (Acts 18:1). Later Timothy and Silas returned from Macedonia to meet Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and six months (Acts 18:11).

Occasion and Purpose

Paul was concerned about the Christians in Thessalonica because of the persecution he and the Thessalonians had faced and because he had been forced to leave before he wanted to. Paul sent Timothy to find out how they were doing:

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.

It was common for teachers and preachers to travel the main roads. These traveling teachers were looking for fame, money, or both. Because Paul had come and gone so quickly, he may have been worried that the truth he had preached would be dismissed and forgotten, only to

be replaced by whatever the next person was trying to “sell”.

Timothy brought Paul good news about the believers in Thessalonica. Paul wrote this letter to express his thanks for their continued faith and love, and he wrote to further encourage them to be faithful to God and to live godly lives in the face of persecution.

The Thessalonians were also worried about the state of believers who had died. Paul wrote to assure them that those who have died are not lost, but they will be raised on the last day.

Date of Writing

This letter was probably written during Paul’s 18-month stay in Corinth, around the year 52 AD. This would make 1 Thessalonians the second letter written by the Apostle Paul (with the letter to Galatians being the first).

Content

This letter can be divided up into two main sections:

1. Personal Matters (1:1-3:13)

Paul begins with a traditional greeting and states that this letter is also from Timothy and Silvanus (Silas).

In the rest of chapter 1, Paul gives thanks to God for the faith, love and steadfastness of the Thessalonians, despite the “much affliction” they faced (1:5). Paul states that they “became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1:7). The report of how the Thessalonians had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1:9) had spread all around Macedonia, Achaia and beyond (1:8).

In chapter 2, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the message he, Silas and Timothy had brought and their conduct among the Thessalonians. They preached the gospel despite much suffering and the shameful treatment they had received (2:2). They preached to please God, not man (2:4). And they worked hard to support themselves, so as not to be a burden on the Thessalonians (2:9). The Thessalonians received the word of God as it really is, the word of God (2:13) and they were willing to suffer for it (2:14).

In 2:17-3:5 Paul talks about his eager desire to see the Thessalonians again. Because Satan hindered Paul and his companions from going back to Thessalonica, Paul sent Timothy to encourage them in their afflictions and to make sure that the tempter had not tempted them away from the faith.

In 3:6-10 Paul rejoices at the good report Timothy has brought back. Paul is greatly comforted that the Thessalonians “are standing fast in the Lord” (3:8).

Paul concludes chapter 3 with a prayer that God the Father and the Lord Jesus would enable them to return to the Thessalonians. Paul also prays that Lord would increase the Thessalonians’ love for each other and for all men, and that God would establish their hearts in holiness until the day of Jesus’ return.

2. Exhortation and Instruction (4:1-5:22)

In chapter 4 Paul begins a new section. Here Paul may be dealing with some concerns Timothy had seen when he visited the Thessalonians. He may also be answering some questions the Thessalonians sent to Paul through Timothy.

In 4:1-6 Paul encourages the Thessalonians to live sanctified lives. He warns them to avoid sexual immorality, “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness” (4:7). Coming from a Gentile background and living in a Greek harbor town, sexual purity was a new idea. It is as evidently difficult for the Thessalonians to leave their old sinful ways behind.

In 4:9-12 Paul praises the Thessalonians’ brotherly love, but also encourages them to love one another more and more (4:10). He encourages them to live quiet lives and to work to support themselves so that they are not dependent on anyone (4:12).

In 4:13-5:11 Paul talks about death and the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The death of believers seems to have been difficult for the Thessalonians, as it is a topic that Paul also speaks about in his second letter to them. Paul here comforts them with the assurance that those who have fallen asleep in Christ will rise again when Christ returns and those who have died will enter heaven together with those believers who are alive at the time of Jesus’ return.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that Christ’s return “will come like a thief in the night” (5:2). Paul encourages them to be ready, as they know that the day is coming, but not exactly when. He encourages the Thessalonians with the salvation God has given them:

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

Paul then gives some practical exhortations. He encourages the Thessalonians to respect those who bring God’s word to them (5:12-13). He encourages them to:

1 Thessalonians 5:13-21 ...Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Paul concludes the letter with a prayer and the assurance that God is faithful:

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Paul also asks the Thessalonians to pray for him and his companions. He asks them to have everyone read this letter he has sent, and he ends with a blessing: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (5:28).

Outline

1. Introduction (1:1)
2. Personal Matters (1:2-3:13)
3. Exhortation and Instruction (4:1-5:22)
4. Conclusion (5:23-28)

(this overview is based on a study prepared by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew,
<http://atlanta.clclutheran.org/booksofthebibleoverview.html>)